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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, participants (N=35) were individuals who were receiving or had received counseling in recent months for varied reasons ranging from personal difficulties to couple and relationship difficulties. A technique that has been used in the learning literature was utilized, having participants write a letter to a friend describing in as much detail as possible how they had benefited from counseling. These written responses were transcribed and categorized according to their structure using the Structure of Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy categories of Prestructural, Unistructural, Multistructural, Relational, or Extended Abstract. The aim of this study was to determine the utility of the SOLO taxonomy for assessing the structure of learning outcomes of counseling. The results suggest that an expanded SOLO known as the Structure of Learning Outcomes from Counseling (SOLOC) offers a promising and exciting way to view the outcomes of counseling within a learning framework. However, it should be noted that the data collection (Letter To Friend) used to classify clients requires a certain level of language and written expression abilities to complete. Other limitations of this study and future research are discussed. (Contains 25 references.) (MKA)

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Assessing the Outcomes of Counselling within a Learning Framework

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Assessing the Outcomes of Counselling within a Learning Framework

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Counsellors generally agree on the importance of learning (unlearning, relearning, new learning) in counselling contexts (Strupp, 1986). Two outcomes of counselling involve (a) clients learning to deal with situations differently and more productively in the short term, and (b) transferring what they have learned to subsequent problem situations rather than returning to counselling each time a difficult situation arises. Thus, a major goal of counselling focuses on the development of skills for lifelong learning by assisting clients to learn how to deal and cope with difficult situations that are encountered throughout the passage of life.

Previous outcome research has not been conceptualised within this framework, but instead has focused on the self-report assessment of behaviour change in the short term, rather than assessing more long term learning characterised by personal growth and development (Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). Quantitatively assessing counselling outcomes with measures of short term behaviour change, such as symptom removal, may not reliably reflect the learning that impacts most on a client's long term well being, or indeed those changes unique and specific to individual clients (House, 1996; Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). Thus, there is a need to develop new and innovative methods that are consistent with current counselling approaches and which reliably assess counselling outcomes. That is, counselling outcome techniques could assess what has been learned from counselling rather than repeatedly answering the question of the general efficacy of counselling in terms of short-term behaviour change.

The SOLO Taxonomy

The psycho-educational learning literature appears to have the potential to provide a reliable framework for assessing the learning outcomes of counselling. Investigations of student's learning outcomes by Biggs and Collis (1982, 1989) resulted in the development of the Structure of Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy that can be used to describe the structural organisation of knowledge. It has been used to measure the learning outcomes of secondary and tertiary students (Biggs & Collis, 1982, 1989; Boulton-Lewis, 1994, 1995). **The SOLO taxonomy focuses on the *structure* of an individual's response, in a designated mode, to describe the quality of their learning.** Additionally, the SOLO taxonomy operates in a number of developmental modes. It is believed that most people who seek counselling are operating in, what Biggs and Collis (1989) refer to as, the formal mode of thinking because the focus of their learning in the counselling context is on developing and expressing their own personal theories for behaving and living life.

The five levels or categories of the structural taxonomy (in the formal mode) range from no learning to expertise in learning and are as follows.

1. Prestructural - The task is engaged, but the learner is distracted or misled by irrelevant aspects or information; nothing meaningful has been learned.
2. Unistructural - The learner focuses on the relevant domain, and picks up one aspect to work with; one specific thing has been learned.
3. Multistructural - The learner picks up more and more relevant or correct features, but does not integrate them; several relevant, independent, and meaningful aspects have been learned.
4. Relational - The learner now integrates the parts with each other, so that the whole has a coherent structure and meaning; aspects learned are integrated into a structure.
5. Extended Abstract - The learner now generalises the structure to take in new and more abstract features representing a higher mode of operation; aspects learned are generalised to a new domain (Biggs and Collis, 1989).

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Learning is enhanced the further up the SOLO taxonomy a learner moves because in the upper levels what has been learned becomes more integrated and meaningful. The bottom three levels (Prestructural, Unistructural and Multistructural) have been defined as quantitative, surface levels of learning whilst the top two (Relational and Extended Abstract) are understood as qualitative, deep learning levels. Deep learners structure their learning to gain deep personal meaning and understanding

Aim the Study

The role of learning in counselling has long been recognised and has been considered to be a factor that is common across all types of therapy. However, it has tended to be conceptualised as a process associated with positive outcomes rather than a desired outcome in and of itself (Lambert, 1986). It is proposed that a framework, which describes a client's learning outcomes in terms of the structure of what they have learned, is an innovative, new, and functional approach to counselling outcome research. The present study examines the use of the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Collis, 1982, 1989) as a tool to tap the learning outcomes of counselling.

Method

Participants

In this **exploratory** study, participants were individuals who were or had received counselling in recent months for varied reasons ranging from personal difficulties to couple and relationship difficulties. Thirty-five individuals participated in the written response component of the study (5 males, 30 females. The age range of the participants was 19 to 65 years of age with a mean age of 36 years. Most of the clients who agreed to participate in the study were receiving relationships counselling or counselling for issues confronted by university students.

Materials

All participants were asked to write a letter to a friend describing in as much detail as possible what they learned and how they gained or benefited from counselling. This procedure has been described and used previously in the learning literature (Tang & Biggs, 1995: Trigwell & Prosser, 1990).

Procedure

A number of agencies who provide counselling services for a variety of concerns in a large metropolitan area and surrounding areas in Australia agreed to facilitate access to their clients. Individual counsellor and client participation was voluntary. Counsellors were asked to give their clients an envelope, which contained an introductory letter, the open-ended response proforma (letter to a friend), and a free-return envelope. Most clients were close to being terminated from counselling.

Analysis

The written responses were transcribed and categorised according to their structure using the SOLO taxonomy categories of Prestructural, Unistructural, Multistructural, Relational, or Extended Abstract. No formal training in classification could be undertaken given that this was the first time that the SOLO taxonomy had been used in this context. After the initial categorisation of the data into SOLO levels by an experienced research assistant, the categorisations were checked by a second person experienced at using the SOLO taxonomy in a student learning context. This comparison resulted in good inter-rater reliability, which was above 85%. After discussion between the two raters, those responses where there was disagreement were assigned to the category suggested by the second more experienced rater. Some difficulties were encountered with categorising responses as being Multistructural and Relational and a decision was taken to develop three levels for Multistructural responses (weak, sound, strong) and two levels (weak and sound) for Relational responses in order to more accurately categorise the responses.

The indicators for each of the SOLO levels and the number of written responses that were categorised at each level are shown below.

Categorisation indicators and the frequency of written and interview responses for each SOLO level.

SOLO Level	Indicators	Number of Responses
Prestructural	Nothing has been learned and no benefits have been gained from counselling. No aspects learned have been incorporated into the response. May restate the question (tautology) or refuse to engage in the task.	1
Unistructural	Only one relevant aspect appears to have been learned from counselling. One single point has been incorporated into the response.	1
Multistructural (Weak)	More than one relevant independent aspect has been learned, but these are limited in number and/or scope. There is no integration of the aspects learned or any attempt to connect them - the aspects learned are treated as independent and unrelated. There is no development of the main points.	4
Multistructural (Sound)	Several relevant independent aspects have been learned; there is no integration of the aspects learned or any attempt to connect them - the aspects learned are treated as independent and unrelated. There is a 'list' feel to the response with no or simplistic development of a few of the main points.	18
Multisturctural (Strong)	Several relevant independent aspects have been learned; there is no overall integration of the independent aspects learned but there may be some attempt to integrate a limited number of aspects. Several of the main points are developed through elaboration, extension, and/or exemplification which results in a response that has a 'chunk' feel.	3
Relational (Weak)	The aspects that have been learned have been mostly integrated into a relating concept or theme, but there may be points discussed that deviate from the overall structure. There is an absence of a list of independent learnings. There is some development of the relating concept/theme through elaboration, extension, and exemplification.	3
Relational (Sound)	The aspects that have been learned have been integrated into a relating concept/theme. There is a strong and robust structure evident throughout the entire response. There are no lists or chunks of unrelated learnings. The relating concept/theme is developed through elaboration, extension, and exemplification.	5
Extended Abstract	The aspects that have been learned have been integrated around a relating concept/theme and that theme is applied to a new area/domain. What has been learned is transferred to more abstract situations (eg., reflect critically on their role in society, use the skills learned to relate better to others to relate better to one). A personal theory for living in a society or community may be explained.	0

Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the utility of the SOLO taxonomy for assessing the structure of the learning outcomes of counselling. The results would suggest that an expanded SOLO known as the Structure Of Learning Outcomes from Counselling (SOLOC) offer a promising and exciting way to view the outcomes of counselling within a learning framework. However, it should be noted that the data collection method (Letter To Friend) used to classify clients requires a certain level of language and written expression abilities to complete. Given the variability in the ability of clients to express themselves on paper this is a limitation. Because of this, it may well be that the SOLOC would underestimate the learning outcomes for clients with low language and written expression skills.

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Future research is needed to test the robustness of the categories on a larger sample of clients and with clients experiencing problems in specific areas. If the categories are found to be stable and clients are easily able to be classified using the Structure Of Learning Outcomes of Counselling (SOLOC) Taxonomy then this approach may have implications for the process of counselling. It may well be that to maximise the learning outcomes, counsellors may need to use strategies and techniques that enhance their clients' learning. This would not replace the therapeutic and counselling approaches and techniques used by counsellors but would be a ***an adjunct to counselling*** based on constructivist learning principals that may well lead to enhanced learning outcomes for clients.

The use of **reflection strategies** can promote deep meaningful learning by assisting people to integrate and apply what they have learned. Hatton and Smith (1995) described four levels of reflection, which can be easily adapted to facilitate learning in a counselling environment. 1. *Technical reflection* is concerned with focusing on immediate behaviours and skills in light of personal worries and previous experience (Unistructural or Multistructural). 2. *Descriptive reflection* requires analysis of one's performance and reasons for outcomes. In this reflection individuals are encouraged to think about why things happen the way they do (Unistructural or Multistructural). 3. *Dialogic reflection* draws on technical and descriptive reflection skills but involves stepping back from the events which leads to a different level of discourse with self. Such reflection is analytic and/or integrative of factors and perspectives (Relational). 4. *Critical reflection* involves extending what has been learned to a social, political or cultural context. By using critical reflection strategies individuals are more able to think about how their learning affects them and others in the broader context (Extended Abstract).

Within the counselling learning environment the following questions may be used when processing the content of a client's letter to promote deeper and more meaningful learning.

Prestructural to Unistructural response:

This may include encouraging individuals to use technical and descriptive reflection in relation to one specific issue to start with. What did you learn? How does this connect with what you already knew about your self, others? How do you feel about this? What do you need to learn next?

Unistructural to Multistructural response:

Dialogic reflection involves technical and descriptive reflection but goes one step further in considering issues using a range of reasoned viewpoints. In order to facilitate a Multistructural response individuals would be required to reflect dialogically in relation to several issues over a period of time using the same reflective questions for each separate issue. What did you learn? How does this connect with what you already knew about your self, others? How do you feel about this? What do you need to learn next?

Multistructural to Relational:

In order to promote relational thinking it would be important to encourage clients to reflect on the many things they have learned with a view to considering the big picture or an overarching concept or theme. What similarities are there in all of the separate issues you have described? What would you say is an idea that connects all of this information in someway? How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself and others? Why is this important to you? How do you feel about this? What do you need to learn next?

Relational to Extended Abstract

Clients are encouraged to think about how the big picture (overarching theme) that has emerged can be applied to broader more abstract contexts like context like society, culture, humanity, world issues, political issues. How can what you have learned be extended? How can what you have learned be used to help others, or society? How can what you have learned be used to make life better for yourself and others. How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself and others?

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